

POST INSIGHT, OPINION & VIEWS

It isn't obvious why Robert McNamara wrote his book on Vietnam. Everywhere one sees quoted the reason he gave, which can't, however, be the real reason because the book hardly fulfills its ostensible mandate.

McNamara decided to write because he had "grown sick at heart witnessing the cynicism and even contempt with which so many people view our political institutions." But if your purpose is to restore faith in law and order, you don't write a book about the prevalence of crime. Precisely what McNamara does not do is engender faith in our political institutions.

If these institutions were wholesome and effective, then we'd have gotten out of Vietnam by the orderly workings of the ballot box. But that wasn't what happened.

The last time the American people can be said to have voted on the question was in 1968, and at that time the Democratic wing of U.S. politics overrode the pacifist wing when at the Chicago convention Hubert Humphrey smashed the resolution associated with George McGovern, to back down on the war. And in November, Richard Nixon was elected on a victory-in-Vietnam platform.

What brought on the end of the war included 1) the failure to make critical military progress in Vietnam (correctly recorded by author McNamara), 2) the consolidated resistance of cultural America, and 3) the total distraction of government by Watergate. Nothing in McNamara's book can bring about a rejuvenation of republican institutions. Far from it: If institutions are in overdrive, humming nicely, you don't need a sudden autopsy on a corpse dead 25 years.

McNAMARA'S FABLE

Better if Ho Chi Minh had written a book (from exile)

ON THE RIGHT

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.



McNamara tells us that we should have known the great realities of the Vietnam theater. They were that Ho Chi Minh's armed revolt was not a communist salient, but was merely an expression of nationalism, perhaps to be compared with Nelson Mandela's association with communism, which turned out to be transitory and opportunistic. And why did we misread the signals? If you can stand it, because of Sen. Joe McCarthy.

McNamara cites John Carter Vincent and John Stewart Service as casualties of McCarthyism, who if they had been around the State Department might have trained the government's vision on the indigenous quality of Asian communism, not seriously related to the struggle for the world. But of course the line in the late 1940s, adopted by such as Vincent and Owen Lattimore, was that the revolutionary movement headed up by Mao Tse-tung truly was nothing more than a democratic flare-up led by an agrarian reformer.

McNamara goes so far as to inform us that it was

"highly probable" that President Kennedy would have had us out of Vietnam if he had lived. Those who seek an understanding of Kennedy's view of Vietnam can learn from his intervention in McNamara's Defense Department. JFK threw out the ghost-written boilerplate designed for loved ones whose family members were casualties in Vietnam and himself wrote to the sister of a casualty:

"Americans are in Vietnam because we have determined that this country must not fall under communist domination. It is also apparent that the communist attempt to take over Vietnam is only part of a larger plan for bringing the entire area of Southeast Asia under their domination. Though it is only a small part of the area geographically, Vietnam is now the most crucial. Your brother was in Vietnam because the threat to the Vietnamese people is, in the long run, a threat to the Free World community, and ultimately a threat to us."

That sounds most awfully alarmist, six comfortable years after the Berlin Wall came down. But between the time JFK wrote those words and the liberation of Eastern Europe, one-third of the people in Cambodia were killed, untold millions of Chinese died on one of the mini-al-



HO CHI MINH
JFK knew better.

tars of Mao's communism, and the free world stood nuclear watch day and night until, finally, the Soviet Union imploded.

It is a terrible pity that McNamara, in his quixotic attempt to restore faith in democratic institutions, should instead rub salt in tender memories. Much more welcome, in A.D. 1995, would be the revelation of a book by Ho Chi Minh, disclosed to the world by a son or grandson, acknowledging that South Vietnamese power backed by the U.S. military very nearly toppled the communist revolution; that if the Christmas bombing in 1972 had been followed by a modestly manned invasion of Hanoi by the South Vietnamese, backed by the U.S. military, Ho would have had to fly the coop and mend his sores in Peking.

Among other things, we'd have been spared McNamara's book.